

Sacred springtime: migration in the ancient world

Nicholas Purcell

Migration has been much in the news. People move, and have always moved, for many reasons. Almost as many stories grow up to explain these movements, and talk about newcomers: many ancient foundation myths are stories of migration. Here Nicholas Purcell considers how and why people moved around the ancient world.

The community is in crisis. There is not enough food to go round – too many mouths to feed. Time to dedicate all the young men born in one year to the gods. Take them to the edge of your land and send them away, never to return.... Off they swarm, like bees out of a hive.

Being wrenched away from home was normal in the Greek and Roman worlds. Migration, displacement, enslavement, exile, flight, diaspora: their nature and problems are all over ancient literature, from the expedition to Troy and the troubled homecomings of the Greek heroes in Homeric poetry on. The example which I started with comes from the mountains of Italy, in the age before the Roman conquests of the third century B.C.

This dedication of a whole generation to the gods was called a ‘Sacred Springtime’, and it was a common theme of stories (in Livy, Festus, Strabo and other later writers) about how new cities or peoples were established out of old ones. A community under pressure would vow to dedicate all children born in a particular spring to a god, and in due course expel them to found or conquer a new home of their own. The typical reason for the crisis was famine caused by crop-failure. As a story, it gave a pattern and a meaning to movements of confused and vulnerable people – which were often chaotic, frightening, and full of uncertainties, like the arrival of refugees from Asia and Africa in today’s Europe.

In the stories told about Sacred Springs, the people expelled were often helped by the gods to whom they had been dedicated, and led by a sacred animal – a woodpecker (as with the Sabine offshoot, the Picentines), a wolf, or an ox, to the place where they could settle. The new community took its name from these divine guides. Help was needed, too, because it was never predictable whether any pre-existing inhabitants would be

welcoming or hostile. Typically the sacred refugees had to fight for their new home, and the most typical god of the Sacred Spring was the war-god Mars.

In some ways, these accounts are like the narratives about cities founding daughter-settlements, of the kind that we often – perhaps in today’s world misleadingly – call ‘colonies’. Crisis at home and conflict with new neighbours was a regular feature of stories about those new settlements too. It was the great scholar Varro, in the time of Cicero, who makes that analogy with bees – ‘when the bees want to send out a colony, as the Sabines used to do all the time, when they had too many children’. Communities of the displaced were normal throughout Antiquity. Some were stable – some soon disappeared or dissolved again.

Desperation and hope; push and pull

While you couldn’t choose not to be sent out in a Sacred Spring, joining in the founding of other new settlements didn’t have the ritually enforced compulsion of those responses to crisis. But how free a choice did others have? What were the pressures, the push and pull factors?

Migration today shows how complicated choices are, and how desperation and hope combine to make it hard to know who has chosen to leave, and who has been expelled. The size of migrant groups varied too. In the Greek archaic period, the *Iliad* knows how the individual ‘displaced person’ might be found anywhere, a stock example of misfortune: the word Homer uses, *metanastes*, is still one of the words Greeks use for the migrants who confront them in their hundreds of thousands.

At the other end of the scale, Romans spoke of the movements of whole peoples in northern Europe – like the Helvetii, whose displacement into Gaul helped spark the Gallic War in the first century

B.C. – in terms very like the Sacred Spring. Ecological overload caused by natural disaster forced migration on a continental scale, and this kind of process too was chronicled from Herodotus’ account of wandering Scythians and Cimmerians around the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. to the ‘barbarian invasions’ which were characteristic of the end of Antiquity.

Migrants and slaves

Some left home more or less voluntarily. More were forced out. Two other examples from the compulsory end of the spectrum of displacement are important for understanding ancient reactions to migration.

Rulers regularly used their power to make communities or parts of communities move, expelling them from cities, or shifting populations around to make new communities in totally different places. The classical Greeks saw this as a typical despotic abuse by their Persian enemies. They were biased, but this does seem to have been standard behaviour on the part of the old monarchies of west Asia. The Jewish exiles lamenting their lost homeland ‘by the rivers of Babylon’ (Psalm 137) are a case in point. Greeks later imagined those communities which had been taken from Greece by Xerxes behaving very similarly and – also in the heart of Mesopotamia – descendants of captives from Eretria sitting and weeping for their unimaginable distance from the sea which marked their homeland. This was an extreme example, but gathering population, sometimes from far away, to create new cities became a standard activity of Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors. It reminds us that urban foundations had many downsides. Cities should not always be seen as simply progressive or civilized.

The Eretrians in the Persian empire were not slaves in any technical sense, but their forcible relocation very much resembles that even more normal aspect of Greek and Roman life, the possibility of owning other people so that they lost all formal rights of self-determination, and certainly the choice of where they lived and worked (discussed elsewhere in this issue by David Lewis). The risk of

enslavement, and the desirability of slaves, is one of the ways in which migration in Antiquity was very different from what we see for the most part in our own world – though today too the multiple ways in which migrants are trafficked blur their apparently ‘free’ status. If Greeks and Romans were used to seeing and relating to people who came from somewhere quite different, that was to a large extent because slaves were to be found so commonly in most places. That changed everything for those migrants who were not slaves too. A writer describing Augustan Rome comments on how strange slaves from Corsica were: impossible to manage, and like one of two kinds of animals, either stupid grazing beasts or savage wild ones, they were a really bad buy even at a knock-down price. Attitudes like that could hardly not rub off on the non-slave outsider.

Underlying both of these kinds of migrant, the resettled town-dweller and the trafficked slave, is another crucial fact about the ancient world: it was generally under-populated. This may seem a bit strange after I have drawn attention to movements such as the Sacred Spring, which precisely aimed to cope where an increase in mouths to feed had sparked a crisis. But such population pressures were local and unusual (though no less catastrophic for that). Normally, more people were good news. That was why the Sacred Spring had a hope of success – there might be vacant sites for new communities. This was why new cities had to be peopled by rulers’ diktat, and why slaves were so valuable; but it also meant that the displaced person was vulnerable to any opportunist who had plenty of ideas as to what uses he or she might be put.

Suspicion and hostility

We are sadly used to ambiguous and hostile attitudes to outsiders and to emigration, and these are just as common, and just as contradictory, in Antiquity. Although people were a valuable and sometimes scarce resource, all outsiders could be viewed with suspicion and hostility – for instance as a source of novel, different, attractive ideas or customs which could threaten the survival of entrenched local practices. But in a world short of people it wasn’t just arrival that was problematic. In the early second century B.C., people from Latin cities in Italy started to flock to Rome, in what sounds very like the migratory movements which have swollen the super-cities of our world, rural populations hoping to better themselves with urban opportunities. It was the authorities of the home cities who minded most though – they were seriously worried by the loss of people to Rome, diminishing their own

demographic resources.

Although community boundaries, and entitled membership, were quite tightly policed by law in the Greek and Roman worlds, this was – we have to remember – effectively a world without nations, a world without frontiers, in the sense we understand the terms. The lot of the displaced person was very variable, and everyone except the citizen was much more vulnerable, much more exposed to coercion. The fate of the newcomer was doubtless often disaster. But at least, and importantly just because extra people were usually good news, newcomers were, even if they were stigmatized and sneered at, able to integrate into the diverse city-communities of the Greek, and, especially, the Roman worlds.

Here is a rather extreme statement of that relative openness – extreme but clearly not ridiculous – by the younger Seneca, writing in the middle of the first century of our era:

consider the abundance of population which the buildings of this gigantic City can scarcely contain – the greater part of this crowd has no fatherland.... Some have come to put their beauty on sale, some their eloquence. There is no people that does not rush to Rome, which pays high prices for virtues and vices alike. Get all these folk to a roll-call, and at each name ask ‘where’s your home?’ You’ll find that the majority have abandoned their home and come to a city which, though very large and very lovely, is not theirs. Now leave this community which can, after all, be seen as common to all, go round all the cities – there is not one in which a great part of the population is not foreign. Move on from those whose convenient location or advantageous hinterland attracts large scale immigration, to remote places and the roughest islands... And yet here too the community is composed more of outsiders than native citizens.

Being a migrant in the Roman world was usually no better than it is today: but migration was basic to how that world worked.

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